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Another Form of Blindness – a Symptom of an Artistic Viewpoint: Glossing the Work of Marcel Duchamp

Abstract

Not blindness itself, but blindness as a symptom for an inner seeing and as a counterforce against a one-sided fixation on beauty and taste were the reasons why Marcel Duchamp from 1916 onwards was occupied with the theme of blindness. Two volumes of *The Blind Man* were displayed in 1917 on the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. The second volume contained comments about the fact that Duchamp's contribution of a *Fountain*, his now so famous ready-made *Urinoir*, signed "R. Mutt", was rejected by the apparently jury-less committee. This means that the theme of blindness was expressed twice: no one could see the work and so his theoretical opposition against beauty and taste could not be illustrated by the *Urinoir* either. How Duchamp from then on also challenged the other senses, so as to avoid focusing only on the eyes, will be dealt with in this article as well. Arguments from the biography, philosophy, mythology, and iconography will be used to underpin the article's main thesis. In this sense the question may be asked whether Duchamp was inspired in this group of his works by humorous etymological and literary references. In the end it will become clear that the theme of blindness in his work and artistic theory is highly paradoxical.

Keywords: blindness, Medusa, *The Fountain*, a blind soldier, *The Blind Man*, Hegel, *Tu m'*, A. Klang, Smell, Taste, Feeling, Touch

Literally taken, blindness is of course the opposite of seeing: it describes a negative situation, a not-seeing, darkness, when there is light everywhere. The blind lack the possibility to register visible light and to pass it on to the brain where it can be processed and interpreted, i.e. given meaning. The colloquial expression is that the blind have been "robbed" of this ability. But blindness can also improve the other

senses, sometimes even “replace” them by enhanced hearing, taste, smell, and touch. Moreover, blindness can start the imagination, the not-seeing can be experienced in another way, what is absent may turn into a presence.

In short, this was the content of the letter about the blind directed to the seeing, which Denis Diderot published in 1749, entitled *Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux qui voient*, emphasizing the other senses as starting points for information, sensation, and imagination. The blind would not need the beauty, which the viewers praise so much. Beauty is monstrous, overestimated, Diderot stated. With the help of the sensibility the other senses invoke, one can renounce the term beauty, because it would transform into some imaginative appearance.¹

Fear of blindness however is still infinite. People’s fear of losing their eyesight goes back a long time. In the Greek myth of Medusa this goddess of revenge had the power to turn any person who looked at her blind and into a stone. In normal usage, blindness is also an Emblem: blind is he who does not recognize the Truth, for example, of Christian religion. The mythical tradition also has something positive to say about blindness. In antiquity a blind person might be called a wise seer, in that he, as Teiresias, would prophesy Oedipus’s tragic future. Not-seeing would imply an inner vision.² As I am talking about Marcel Duchamp here, the question now arises if he also regarded blindness as a positive force, in which he saw alternatives? Did he see himself as a cultural critic? Did he think that blindness was a cultural phenomenon, a sign of an underlying social ailment, as red spots on your skin are an external Symptom of the invisible disease measles?³

Blindness may involve feelings, moods, and sentiments. But in the case of Marcel Duchamp, one would not expect to be redirected to the “Age of Sensibility”, situated long ago, in the late 18th century, when the so called soul would show its great emotions of love or other cultic forms of compassion.⁴ In his life in the first half of the 20th century Duchamp argued definitely in a prosaic, although humorous and ironic manner. He kept to the subject of senses in a rational way and used another form of artistic rhetoric.⁵

Marcel Duchamp had a particular view of art. He deeply disliked all kinds of painting of which the only goal he judged to be pleasing to the retina (the membrane in the eye that collects the light), so that a purely aesthetic feeling is experi-

1 D. Diderot, *Lettre sur les aveugles à l’usage de ceux qui voient*, London, 1749. On its cover Diderot quoted Virgil: *Possunt, nec posse videntur*; S. Lojkine “Béauté aveugle et monstruosité sensible: Le détournement de la question esthétique chez Diderot (La Lettre sur les aveugles)”, in: *La Beauté et ses monstres dans l’Europe baroque 16^e–18^e siècles*, eds. L. Cottegnies, T. Gheeraert, G. Venet, Paris, 2003, pp. 61–78.

2 G. Baudy, “Blindheit und Wahnsinn. Das Kultbild im poetologischen Diskurs der Antike: Stesichoros und die Homerische Helena”, in: *Die Unvermeidlichkeit der Bilder*, eds. G. von Graevenitz, S. Rieger, F. Thürlemann, Tübingen, 2001, pp. 32–57. The author did not mention Medusa.

3 G. Didi-Huberman, *L’Image sur vivante. Histoire de l’art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris, 2002, German edition *Das Nachleben der Bilder*, Frankfurt a. M., 2010, p. 301.

4 R. Krüger, *Das Zeitalter der Empfindsamkeit. Kunst und Kultur des späten 18. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland*, Leipzig, 1972.

5 Th. Steiner, *Duchamps Experiment, Zwischen Wissenschaft und Kunst*, Munich, 2006, pp. 37, 39.

enced that enhances Taste. Still in 1960 he repeated his view: “I consider taste – bad or good – the greatest enemy of art”.⁶ He wanted to think of other things than of retinal art.⁷ Taste was in those days still a sign of belonging to a higher class in society. You only had to school your taste and you would also be part of the elite. Having taste and showing it was a social “must”, which led to call it a kind of tutelage.⁸ In Paris, but also in Western art in general, the goals of recognizing beauty and taste were a measure of cultural achievement since the 19th century. This was sheer horror to Duchamp.⁹ Whenever and wherever this was the only goal of art, he was deeply opposed. And therefore he always invented new forms for his non-art – however not in the sense of anti-art.¹⁰ “Peut-on faire des oeuvres, qui ne soient pas d’art?” (Can one make art, that is none?), he wondered in 1913.¹¹ He was always looking for answers to these questions. Not all of his works that form part of these answers are dealing with some sort of blindness, but many do.

As a blind soldier

Duchamp has never depicted blind persons in his artworks, nor did he ever become blind himself. It may however have made him stop and think, when both his sisters Susanne and Yvonne were treating blind soldiers in hospitals during the World War I, when many had lost their eyesight through gas attacks.¹² He was discharged from serving because of a heart failure,¹³ but there is one more biographical clue.

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- 6 M. Sanouillet, *Marcel Duchamp. Duchamp du signe. Écrits*, Paris, 1957, English edition M. Sanouillet, E. Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge, New York, 1989, p. 153; K. Kuh, *The Artistic Voice – Talks with Seventeen Artists*, New York, 1962, pp. 81, 83, 88–90, 92 and BBC-programme *Monitor*, 29 March 1961; S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Interviews and Statements*, Ostfildern-Ruit 1992 p. 117–121, 125; idem ed., *Marcel Duchamps ready-mades. 180 Aussprüche aus Interviews*, Zürich, 1973 p. 19.
- 7 P. Bexte, *Blinde Seher. Die Wahrnehmung von Wahrnehmung in der Kunst des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Dresden, 1999, p. 3; S. Grüne, *Blinde Anschauung*, Frankfurt a. M., 2009, pp. 77ff.; J. Gough-Cooper, J. Caumont, *Ephemerides on and about Marcel Duchamp and Rose Sélavy 1887–1968*, Venice, 1995 (henceforth *Ephemerides*).
- 8 W. Hofmann, *Tag und Nachträume. Über die Kunst die wir noch nicht haben*, Munich, 1994, p. 43.
- 9 *Ephemerides*, 9 December 1960; B. Marcadé, *Laisser pisser le mérinos. La paresse de Marcel Duchamp*, Paris, 2006, pp. 14, 30; S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Interviews...*, p. 81.
- 10 “Je n’aime pas le mot anti” (I do not like the word “anti” Duchamp said”, in: R. Hamilton, *Le Grand Déchiffreur. Sur Marcel Duchamp. Une sélection d’écrits, d’entretiens et de lettres*, Affoltern, 2000, p. 76.
- 11 D. Daniels, *Ready-Made Century*, Leipzig, 2019, p. 25: Note of 1913 in his White Box: *Marcel Duchamp, à l’infiniitif. The typosophic society*. A tygotranslation by Richard Hamilton and Ecker Bonk of Marcel Duchamp’s White Box, Cologne, 1999, p. 1; S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Die Schriften*, Zürich, 1981, p. 116.
- 12 *Ephemerides*, 12 March 1915, 17 October 16; Presumably Picabia and Duchamp knew a poem of G. Apollinaire *La Méduse* from his book of poems *Le bestiaire ou Cortège d’Orthée*, 1911. The poet meant a jellyfish and compared it with himself, see W. Bohn, *Apollinaire on the Edge. Modern Art, Popular Culture and the Avant-Garde*, New York, 2010.
- 13 *The New York Tribune*, 24 October 1915, IV, pp. 2–3; *Ephemerides*, 1 November 1909, 6 January 1915; P. Cabanne, *Entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp*, Paris, 1967. English edition *Dialogues with*

Immediately after the war, in 1918, Duchamp played a blind soldier in a short film (July 8), and this story has been nearly forgotten. The film is the work of the French director and experimentalist Leonce Joseph Perret (1880–1935), who came to New York in 1917 because of his pacifist stance. In a film entitled *Lafayette we come* the director referred to the arrival in France of the American General John Pershing. Duchamp participated in this film, too.¹⁴ It was only a very short scene, in which a nurse, played by Dolores Casinelli, reads a story to some blind soldiers. The scene must have been up-beat, the situation of the blind soldiers notwithstanding. In a letter to his brother in law Jean Crotti, Duchamp mentioned the scene being shot for only two minutes.¹⁵ Apparently not much else is known about it. Nobody has ever asked him about his playing a blind soldier, although he was interviewed many times, and no critic has ever interpreted this episode. No one thought Duchamp's acting of any great importance.

But still, Duchamp published only a year earlier, when Perret came to New York, a little magazine called *The Blind Man*, of which only two issues were made. His cooperation with the filmmaker, his later willingness to play a blind soldier, may have been connected to the fact of his sisters' caring for blind soldiers and his editing of the magazine *The Blind Man*.

The Blind Man no. 1

With both these two issues of the magazine *The Blind Man* (Fig. 1) we have one of the great enigmas of modern art history. Many scholars have tried to solve it,¹⁶ and more recently feelings again were running high about it. In short, the following questions were debated: Was the upturned urinal that Duchamp had have sent to the *Exhibition of Independent Artists*¹⁷ on 9 April 1917, signed "R. Mutt" and under the mythical title *Fountain*, really his work? What does the signature "R. Mutt" really mean?

Was it meant as a ready-made? And is there a connection with the theme of blindness?

Marcel Duchamp, London, 1971, pp. 19, 52. Duchamp served in the military for a very short time and worked for a French captain in New York in the French mission for some weeks. Mad(eleine) Turban lived with him in 1917 for one month in New York, not being able to find a hotel. At that time she worked for the Red Cross and tried to collect money for the blind soldiers in France. *Ephemerides*, 9 October 1917, 4 December 1917, 24 December 1917, 9 January 1918.

14 *Ephemerides*, 7 July 1918, 8 July 1918

15 Duchamp to Jean Crotti, 8 July 1918, F. M. Naumann, H. Obalk, *Affect Marcel. The Selected Correspondence of Marcel Duchamp*, London, 2000, p. 55.

16 A. Schwarz, *The Complete Works of Marcel Duchamp*, New York, 2000, no.345. On 11 April 1917 Duchamp wrote to his sister Suzanne: "One of my female friends under a masculine pseudonyme Richard Mutt, sent a porcelain urinal as a sculpture [...]" ("une pissotière en porcelaine comme sculpture", quoted in: F. M. Naumann, H. Obalk, *Affect Marcel*, 11 April 1917, p. 47. It seems important that Duchamp considers this ready-made as a sculpture. Complete research see W. Camfield, *Marcel Duchamp, Fountain*, Houston, 1989; H. H. Mann, *Marcel Duchamp: 1917*, Munich, 1999.

17 *Ephemerides*, 5 December 1916, 6 April 1917.

The Jury refused to accept this apparent vulgar and a-moral thing as an artwork – thereby proving not to be independent at all. It was put behind a partition wall, where it was again taken away. Duchamp sold it to his friend Walter C. Arensberg, after Alfred Stieglitz photographed it for *The Blind Man* no. 2 (Fig. 2), putting it on a pedestal in front of Marsden Hartley's painting *The Warriors* (1913). By this the *pissotière* resembled a literal pedestal fountain.¹⁸



Fig. 1. Marcel Duchamp, cover for *The Blind Man* no.1, April 1917



Fig. 2. *The Blind Man* no. 2. Alfred Stieglitz's photo of Marcel Duchamp's „Fountain“ of 1917

The mystery surrounding this work has a twist: in Stieglitz' photo one can still see on the label the title of the product as "[Fou]ntain" (meaning crazy?) and the address of the anonymous person who sent the work to the exhibition as 33 West, 67th street.¹⁹ It was that of Duchamp's good friend Louise Norton in New York, where Duchamp's studio was also located at that time, and she was the sender, as one now definitely knows.²⁰ Later on, Duchamp explained that he had seen the porcelain urinal in the windows of the Firm J. L. Mott and bought it. But documents of the

18 Cf. S. Banz, *Marcel Duchamp: Richard Mutt's Fountain*, Cully, 2019, Les Éditions KMD: No 24, pp.180–181.

19 *Ibid.*, Ill. 8

20 At that time, Louise Norton lived normally at 110 West 88th Str. in New York, where also Picabia had his studio on the ground floor. *Ephemerides*, 22 May 1917; B. Bradley, "Duchamp's Fountain: The Baroness Theory debunked", *Burlington Magazine*, 2019, 161, pp. 805–810.

firm made clear that they had never shown this model in their windows and their models were altogether quite different.²¹ So the work's origin remains unclear.

For a number of years now, the scandalous story appears every now and then, suggesting the work *Fountain* is originally a creative choice by the German performer and artist Elsa, Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven.²² She saw herself as a living work of art. Anyhow, the Baroness has never claimed to be the originator of the urinal and Duchamp has always spoken of "my urinoir" naming it *Fountain*, and later made drawings and etchings of it.²³ Furthermore he already in 1914 wrote a note saying: "On n'a que: pour femelle la pissotière et on en vit." (This is all we have: the urinal in place of the female, and this is how we live), which demonstrates his early interest in the motif.²⁴ The signature "R. Mutt" still points to the Baroness, according to some of her advocates, because of the German word for poverty (Armut) which refers to the indeed very poor artist Elsa. Duchamp always denied this vehemently,²⁵ but he never explained the real origins of the work nor his relationship with her. He only said that he painted the pseudonym on the work and that he meant the word "Richard" with the letter R. Now, that could mean "rich art" (riche art) with "Mutt", being a quote of the then very popular cartoon "Mutt and Jeff", as Duchamp explained.

He indeed had this urinal sent in upturned and we can now freely speculate about its meaning. It has no practical use anymore, other than being a fountain for perhaps our imagination, as its title suggests. Louise Norton in the second issue of *The Blind Man* said that it resembled a female "Buddha" ("Le Buddha de la salle de

21 R. Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, Paris, 1959, German ed.: R. Lebel, *Duchamp von der Erscheinung zur Konzeption*, Cologne, 1962, revised edition 1972, p. 132; *The Definitely Unfinished Marcel Duchamp*, ed. Th. de Duve, MIT, Boston, 1991, p. 147, ill. 49; J. L. Mott Iron Works 1208 New York. H. H. Mann, op. cit., p. 52; O. Hahn, "Marcel Duchamp interviewed", *L'Express*, Paris, no. 684, July 1964, pp. 22–23; K. Neuburger, *Die amerikanische Erfahrung, oder: Weshalb Marcel Duchamp in New York Werke ausstellen konnte, die keine Kunst sind*, Cologne, 2017, p. 246; S. Banz, *Marcel Duchamp...*, pp. 11, 41–45, 49, 148–149.

22 I. Gammel, *Baroness Elsa: Gender, Dada and Everyday Modernity – a Cultural Biography*. Cambridge, 2002 German edition eadem, *Die DadaBaroness: Das wilde Leben der Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*, Berlin, 2003; G. Thompson, *Duchamp's Urinal? The facts behind the façade*, Leeds, 2008 (e-book 2001); F. M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp. Fountain, an hommage*, ed. F. M. Naumann, New York, 2017; idem, *The Recurrent Hunting Ghost. Essays on Art. Life and Legacy of Marcel Duchamp*, New York, 2012, pp. 70–81; J. F. Houssez, *Marcel Duchamp. Biographie*, Paris, 2006, pp. 134, 175, 187, 190, 193, 194, 219, 226–229, 234, 266ff, 335; D. Daniels, *Marcel Duchamp und die anderen. Der Modellfall einer künstlerischen Wirkungsgeschichte in der Moderne*, Cologne, 2001, p. 181; Th. Paijmans, "Het urinoir is niet van Duchamp", *SeeAllThis. (99 geniale vrouwen in de kunst.)*, 3, vol., 10, 2018, pp. 18–29; S. Banz, *Marcel Duchamp...*, pp. 42–45, 120–123.

23 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 593, 594, 606. Duchamp even integrated a miniature urinal into his *Boite-en-Valise*: A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 462.

24 This note from *La Boîte de 1914* was found by Banz and first published by him in *Marcel Duchamp...*, p. 19, fig. 2.

25 "How Marcel Duchamp declared the signiture R. Mutt", in: M. Amaya, *Art and Artists*, vol. 1, no. 4, July 1966, p. 10; S. Banz, *Marcel Duchamp...*, pp. 48–49, P. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, London, 1971, pp. 53ff, 86.

bain”). Not to our actual eyes, but before our spiritual eye we now can recognize something that is male and female at the same time. Duchamp indeed loved to allude to a unification of the male and female genders as it has already had been proposed as a primordial human principle in alchemistic theory. Two years later he gave the *Mona Lisa* – of course a copy – her now famous moustache that covered her perhaps even more famous smile.²⁶

It may be significant that Duchamp installed another urinoir/fountain – unsigned and with a different set of waterholes – probably already in 1916, hanging it freely in his studio; so that nobody would use it and it no longer could function as a kind of well/source.²⁷ Apparently, he saw it as an object of thought and not as a work of art, a ready-made no doubt that could function as spiritual focal point²⁸ because of its gender reversal and erotic identity. In fact, doesn't the word “ready-made” sound as a “ready maid”, a willing girl, as Thomas Zaunschirm suggested?²⁹ The ready-made was finished but its meaning was still hidden and had yet to be invented by the viewer.

The first issue of the magazine *The Blind Man* of 10 April 1917 had to be on display – as background information – at the *Exhibition of Independent Artists* and to establish the blind man as seer.³⁰ It indeed happened in an unforeseen way but at the end of the exhibition the magazine copies were still untouched, nobody had taken any.³¹ Thus, not having been read, the magazine contributed to the unintended blindness. The articles were, with only one exception, complete products of the imagination. Its three editors Marcel Duchamp, Henri-Pierre Roché, and Beatrice Wood could during the preparation of the exhibition not foresee what eventually would happen. The magazine's title *The Blind Man* could indeed indicate to Duchamp's abhorrence of “retinal” artworks.

The Blind Man no. 2

The second issue of *The Blind Man* (Fig. 3) was published on 25 May 1917, and was edited by P. B. T (Roché, Beatrice Wood and Totor, the name Roché had given Duchamp from then on).³² It is dedicated in large parts to the rejected *Fountain* as the CHOICE. As this word had been stressed now, it seems as if choice should replace taste.³³ All the three editors are justifying the circumstances of the refused exhibition piece as the Richard Mutt case, which is not about the making of the work at

26 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 369; *Ephemerides*, 1 July 1912.

27 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 351. S. Banz, *Marcel Duchamp...*

28 *Marcel Duchamp, à l'infinif...*, p. 1.

29 Th. Zaunschirm, *Bereites Mädchen Ready-made*, Klagenfurt, 1983.

30 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 346; R. Lebel, op. cit., p.169; H. H. Mann, op. cit., p.53.

31 H.-P. Roché, *Victor. Ein Roman*, trans. S. Werle, Munich, 1986, p. 39.

32 *Ephemerides*, 27 April 1917, 5 May 1917.

33 This suggestion is made by Helen Molesworth, M. Gioni ed., *Appearance Stripped Bare. Desire and the Object in the Work of Marcel Duchamp and Jeff Koons, Even*, New York, 2019, p. 23.



Fig. 3. Marcel Duchamp, *The Blind Man* no. 2, cover, 1917

all but about the imaginative act of choosing.³⁴ The exhibition jury's judgement had been that the work was a-moral, vulgar, and a case of plagiarism of an industrial product.³⁵ It was impossible for them to see the every day object, a product used in a bathroom even, in another visual context. They were unable to use a different visual language with which one can freely associate an object's various meanings. The fact that the work had not been exhibited and had been put out of sight behind a partition wall resulted in a situation of not-seeing and not being able to see.³⁶ The work for which the six dollar sending fee had been payed, was not even published in the exhibition catalogue.

This is now a case of "double blindness". The jury had been blind, in that they were interfering with a decision that did not concern them – the artists were independent, weren't they? – and on the other hand they had not recognized that the upturned urinal signed "R. Mutt 1917" contained a potential force of spirituality. "Art is no source for pleasure, it is a source [...]" Duchamp would firmly declare

34 *The Blind Man* no. 2, printed in L. Lippard, *Tzara, Arp, Duchamp and others*, New York, 1971, p. 143.

35 L. Blunck, *Duchamps Readymade*, Munich, 2017, pp. 168–169.

36 P. Cabanne, op. cit., pp. 55–56.

much later, in 1960.³⁷ Louise Norton, the person who possibly delivered the work at the exhibition, declared using the title *The Buddha of the Bathroom*, that the Fountain had been a product of the imagination.³⁸ Other more serious people however, would look further. So can somebody who is blind not discover more hidden meanings? Let us try here.

The so called (crazy) urinoir, with its French title *Fontaine* may refer to the word *font* (meaning “they make”, which reminds us of the ready-made) and the word *aine* (meaning “groin”, where the genital area is); this, principally speaking, is the area of creation – procreation.³⁹ Remember Gustave Courbet’s 1866 painting *L’origine du monde* of a female genital area. Duchamp did always accuse Courbet to be the beginner of only one-dimensional retinal art.⁴⁰ He could have seen Courbet’s painting which in 1913 was presented at the art-gallery of Bernheim in Paris. Maybe this *urinoir* was his answer: In contrast to a picture, this upturned ready-made was able to unify two different and mutually exclusive points of view.

Medusa and her Shadow

An old friend of Duchamp’s since his youth, Francis Picabia, may have been decisive in his contribution to *The Blind Man* no. 2. He gave his poem the title *Medusa* and writes at its beginning about “superior hypocrisy spirits without lights”, referring no doubt to the members of the jury; the poem ends “I am looking for a sun”, so not THE sun.⁴¹ He may be referring to the alchemistic meaning of the sun as a metaphor for Jupiter, the origin of creation. Medusa, on the other hand, who gave the poem its title, had the crazy power to turn people who looked at her into stone and to blind them. This myth is in direct conflict with what an artist does; while creating he has to withstand Medusa’s force.⁴² Peter Paul Rubens has indeed painted her terrible head with snakes as her hair, but this is only a picture, so that has no real influence on the viewer. Duchamp could have been familiar with the painting

37 G. Charbonnier, “Six entretiens avec Marcel Duchamp”, *RTF France-Culture*, 9 December 1960–13 January 1961, here 9 December 1960; S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Interviews und Statements*, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1992, p. 88.

38 P. Cabanne, op. cit., pp. 55–56.

39 With this argument the author wants to oppose the interpretation of P. B. Franklin, who is convinced that Duchamp’s *Fountain* transformed the history of art by creating a relation between avantgarde-art and queer sexuality in an exclusively all-male-meaning. P. B. Franklin, “Object Choice: Marcel Duchamp’s Fountain and the Art of Queer Art History”, *Oxford Art Journal*, 2000, vol. 23, 1.

40 D. Ades, N. Cox, D. Hopkins, *Marcel Duchamp*, London, 1999, pp. 202, 203; P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 43; R. E. Kuenzli, M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp. Artist of this Century*, Cambridge, London, 1987, p. 175; S. Banz, *Louis Michel Eilshemius und sein Einfluss auf Marcel Duchamp*, Vienna, 2016, pp. 63–64.

41 F. Picabia, “Medusa”, *Blind Man* no. 2 (n. n).

42 Th. Albrecht, *The Medusa Effect. Representation and Epistemology in Victorian Aesthetic*, New York, Albany, 2007, pp. 21, 27, about Freud pp. 27ff, 35.

of *Medusa*, as he had visited the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1912 where the work is in the collection.⁴³

There are still a few more considerations possible: In his studio in New York, so not a real exhibition space, he had next to the *Fountain* another ready-made, the now famous hat rack (Fig. 4).⁴⁴ “I took the thing away from the floor and then with me onto the planet of aesthetics”, he told Harriet Sidney Janis in 1953.⁴⁵ This hat rack with its curved hooks around a centre pole originated from the furniture maker Thonet.⁴⁶ It now was devoid of its original function of hat rack. It resembles somewhat a head with curved snake-hair, so why not a Medusa? For Duchamp, even its shadow seemed important, for he had it photographed, presumably by his friend Henri-Pierre Roché (Fig. 5).⁴⁷ He seemed to have realised his carrying shadow, as he wrote already in 1913 as an *ombre portée* (carrying shadow).⁴⁸ What could they carry other than a meaning and, of course, no hats anymore? Memorizing this early note, he gave to a second photo of many shadows of hanging ready-mades on the wall of his studio in 1918 the same title *Ombres portées*.⁴⁹ Let us stick to the myth: Medusa’s shadow would of course not have the avenging power that the real figure would have and would not turn an onlooker blind. Her unbodily, colourless and untouchable shadow is only remotely reminding us of blindness and results in a reversal. It invites us to an imaginative way of seeing. It is all about the dialectics between blindness and inner vision.⁵⁰ And there are more possibilities: Around 1916 Duchamp was a good friend of the three Stettheimer sisters, Ettie, Florine and Carrie, whom he was teaching French. The one called Ettie, he liked most.⁵¹ It was she, who posed for the portrait of Medusa which her sister Florine

43 *Ephemerides*, 26 September 1912.

44 A. Schwarz, op. cit., p. 31, no. 249, 598.

45 Marcel Duchamp, *Notes*, ed. P. Matisse, Boston, 1983, note no. 185; Th. de Duve, *Picturaler Nominalismus. Marcel Duchamp. Die Malerei und die Moderne*, Munich, 1987 p. 223.

46 R. R. Shearer, G. Alvarez eds., “Why the Hatrack is and/or is not a Ready-made”, in: *Tout-Fait*, vol. 1, 3 December 2000, http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_3/Multimedia/Shearer/Shearer01.html [accessed 18 May 2020].

47 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 351, 257; *Ephemerides*, 27 October 1964. Duchamp said that he himself took the photograph, although he can be seen on it sitting next to the door. *Ephemerides*, 8 July 1918, 27 October 1964; R. Lebel, op. cit., pp. 32, 52, 72.

48 M. Sanouillet, op. cit., p. 103; Is it possible that Duchamp thought of Lautréamont’s Chant IV, strophe 5 of his *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Paris, 1868? Describing blindness in it he starts with the sentence: “Sur le mur de ma chambre, quelle ombre dessinée, avec une puissance incomparable, avec une fantasmagorique projection de sa silhouette racornie [...]”. (“On the wall of my room, what a drawn shadow, with an uncomparable power, with a fantomic projection of his shrivelled silhouette[...].”).

49 D. Daniels, op. cit., pp. 26, 27, 106, 107; Duchamp even wrote a note about his consideration if the shadow can be the a figure in 4 dimensions, although it is a cast shadow of an object in 3-dimensions, *Marcel Duchamp, à L’Infiniitif...*, p. 81.

50 P. de Man, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rethoric of Contemporary Criticism*. Oxford, 1971, p. 22.

51 *Ephemerides*, 15 January 1916, 24 October 1916, 10 November 1916, 28 July 1918, 9 August 1917, 29 July 1918, 2 August 1918; P. Cabanne, English edition, op. cit., p. 57.



Fig. 4. Henri-Pierre Roché, photo of Marcel Duchamp's studio, 1918, the urinoir and the hat rack hanging next to the door



Fig. 5. Henri-Pierre Roché, photo of shadows on the wall of Duchamp's studio, 1918



Fig. 6. Florine Stettheimer, *Medusa*, painting, 1908

painted in 1908 (Fig. 6). Florine had a show in New York in 1916 at Knoedler Gallery, 556, 5th Avenue, where Duchamp met them.⁵² It is very plausible that he saw there, or at their home, the *Medusa* portrait of his dear friend Ettie.

Parenthese: indifference?

Could it be an art historical sacrilege to involve a mythical meaning into Duchamp's work of ready-mades? According to Duchamp's argument of indifference about the meanings of his ready-mades, it seems necessary to look at his attitude here in a more thoughtful way, because: could it be wrong to write about one of his ready-mades in the sense of Medusa, when the artist did never want to involve any meaning with it and if he insisted that he was searching objects which had no meaning in any field of art? On the one hand he might have been right: a "hat rack" remains a "hat rack", although it is hanging from the ceiling (in Duchamp's studio) and cannot be used for the purpose it was made for. One would always stick to its first meaning, especially when it is not altered in form or colour. On the other hand, the artist and with him the viewer might see in it something imaginative, which reminds you of something else, especially if the object is dislocated or is turned upside down. So if the artist sticks to the choice of his given ready-made-(object), which keeps its first meaning, he cannot forbid the viewer to use his phantasy (which the artist also uses in secret). It works as Duchamp remarked himself: He wrote down on a piece of paper that an "analogie" is also an "infra-mince" (a tiny difference – an in-between – between what you see and what you imagine), and he remarked in his *Boîte Verte*: "Arriver à l'impossibilité de transfusion mémoire visuelle suffisante pour transporter d'un point à l'autre semblable à l'autre l'impression en mémoire".⁵³ (Arriving at the impossibility of a transfusion of sufficient visual memories to transport from one point to another while this stays comparable to an impression within the memory). Staying indifferent – and he really wanted that challenge for all lovers of aesthetics⁵⁴ – Duchamp otherwise could not and did not want to get rid of analogies, which would not at all alter the object as such. It is always a question of the grey matter of your mind, which always pleased him a lot. Where we look at in case of already made objects, seems to be neither – nor. The artists lingers, so to speak, in between: indifferent, as he wants to be.⁵⁵ But the truth is that the artist in case of Duchamp made some preparations and decisions beforehand: he made the choice of a special object, put the object upside down or hung it, perhaps gave it a signature

52 *Ephemerides*, 24 October 1916.

53 Marcel Duchamp, *Notes...*, note no. 2; M. Sanouillet, op. cit., p. 67.

54 "I threw the bottlerack and the urinal into their faces to discourage aesthetics and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty", wrote Duchamp in 1962 in a letter to Hans Richter.

H. Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. D. Britt, London, 1965, pp. 207–208.

55 P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 42.

or a title, let its shadow be photographed, let the print published etc. So without declarations, he intended to give hints, how the object should be imagined, analogical or even allegorical.⁵⁶ His retreat in indifference certainly was not absolute. Actually, it was the philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel who thought about the problem of perception in conflict: first to see the object, which in his eyes was as evident as the truth and second to imagine something (else) in it and with the medium of the object, which he decided to give the name “also” (*Auch*), because the object then mediates a diversity of qualities.⁵⁷ But Marcel Duchamp denied to have been influenced by Hegel.⁵⁸ He discovered the same philosophy.

Medusa II

In 1918, having seen the hat-rack and its shadow already in his studio, Duchamp again quoted this shadow when he accepted a commission from his patron and friend Katherine S. Dreier. He, who was so much against painting as an art form, was to paint an oblong picture intended for a place above her bookshelves (Fig. 7). It would result in a very enigmatic statement, a painting against all paintings, that would be unifying all of Duchamp's earlier considerations. He gave it the title *Tu m'*.⁵⁹ You could complete this title, for example with “*Tu m'aimes*” (you



Fig. 7. Marcel Duchamp, *Tu m'*, 1918, for his patron, Katherine S. Dreier. Yale Museum

56 Marcel Duchamp, *Notes...*, note no. 8: “L'allegorie (en général) est une application de l'infra-mince”.

57 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), Frankfurt a. M., 1973, pp. 99–101.

58 L. S. Gold, *A Discussion of Marcel Duchamp's Views on the Nature of Reality and Their Relation to the Course of His Artistic Career*. B. A. Diss., Princeton University, May 1958; S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp, Interview and Statements* p. 68.

59 S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp, Die Schriften...*, pp. 118, 172; Marcel Duchamp, *Brief an/Lettres à/Letters to Marcel Jean*. Munich 1987, pp. 15, 19; *Ephemerides*, 9 January 1918, 8 July 1918, 20 May 1935; A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 354; P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 60; Exh. cat. *Marcel Duchamp*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1977 p. 265 (text of Herbert Molderings) no. 114. Duchamp wrote in his *la Boîte verte* how he painted the shadows by using a projector. *Marcel Duchamp, abécédaire. Approches critiques*. Musée National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1977 p. 149.

love me) or “Tu m’émmerdes” (you disturb me).⁶⁰ Any consonant would do, said Duchamp.⁶¹ But it also suggests the signature “R. Mutt” as a palindrome. In the painting, however, the “fountain” does not appear, but the shadow of the hat-rack of 1917 does.⁶² Astonishingly, the many attempts at interpreting this enigmatic work have almost completely neglected this aspect. Because Duchamp painted the shadow so big, and next to the corkscrew on the other side, and above convoluted lines that remind us of his *Trois stoppages d’étalon* of 1913/1914,⁶³ this hat rack shadow must have a particular significance: a meaning that reflects the other meaning of the corkscrew shadow, that metaphorically liberates the ghost from the bottle, which



Fig. 8. The *Goupillon* and the handy hand of the painting *Tu m’*

60 Th. Zaunschirm, op. cit., pp. 77, 78, 79, 83–106.

61 P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 60.

62 S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Die Schriften...*, pp. 118–119. Herbert Molderings has a different interpretation in the light of the Euclidean/non-Euclidean perspective, idem, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics of Chance*, trans. J. Brogden, New York, 2010, p. 98.

63 S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp, Die Schriften...*, p. 116; R. Lebel, op. cit., pl. 78; A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 282. This work of 1913 represents the three one-metre-measurements by chance in opposition to the Napoleonic one metre-measurement in Musée Sèvres in Paris; *Ephemerides*, 19 May 1914; étalon was a sign for a shop where one was mending socks and stockings. *Ephemerides*, 10 June 1912; H. Molderings, *Kunst als Experiment. Marcel Duchamps "3 Kunststopf-Normalmasse"*, Munich, Berlin, 2006.

equals taste (Fig. 8). As does the real object of the bottlecleaning *Goupillon* that sticks out of the picture towards the viewer as a ready-made.⁶⁴ What does that word *Goupillon* mean, if anything? Is the *gout* (taste) hidden in it, and *pilon* (bottlebrush)? Should this instrument clean the viewer's eyes, and so his vision and understanding? One of course is reminded of Duchamp's bottle-drying rack of 1914 of which the title *Egouttoir* refers to *égoutter* (drip-dry), which again has overtones of the word *gout* or taste, that must be get rid of as Duchamp explained.⁶⁵ If all this makes any sense, would it not be possible that also the hat rack has references to Seeing? And may not Medusa have been intended here? As her own shadow she may no longer have any power, but the image could still be taken as a threat to anyone who looks at her.⁶⁶

According to Duchamp, his titles were always very important: in 1961 he argued in his text *Appropos of "Readymades"* that the purpose was "[...] to carry the mind of the spectator towards other regions more verbal".⁶⁷ ("[...] était destiné à emporter l'esprit du spectateur vers d'autres régions plus verbales").⁶⁸ His aim was, to catch a new dimension with it.⁶⁹ In this perspective on the titles, it is obvious that his "indifference", which was so often mentioned by Duchamp, was not really his attitude. The titles are indeed chosen in a very sophisticated way. Also the French word *porte-chapeau* comes to mind. Let's look at all the double meanings. *Porte* (door, exit) *échappe* (escapes) and *d'eau* (water) could refer to Medusa's story, who was raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena – who became very angry, because Medusa had offended her, so she was subsequently beheaded by Perseus. Now the random wavy forms of the *Trois Stoppages Étalon* in the background of the *Hat-rack*- shadow can be newly interpreted (Fig. 9).⁷⁰ May these refer to the waves of Poseidon? Or perhaps to Medusa' gushing blood, from which Pegasus is born as her son? Duchamp indeed believed in Literalising art, which he called "pictorial nominalism".⁷¹

64 *Ephemerides*, 8 July 1918

65 *Ibid.*, 18 October 1915 "égoutter is the epitome of non-taste". *Ibid.*, 15 January 1916; P. Hulthen, "The Blind Lottery of Reputation or the Duchamp Effect", in: *Exh. Cat. Marcel Duchamp*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1993, preface.

66 It may be significant, that there was a French gallerist named Goupil (!) who in the 19th century founded his gallery, later called Gallery Knoedler in New York, where Florine Stettheimer had an exhibition in 1916, and might have shown her painting *Medusa*, the portrait of her sister Ettie. This irony Duchamp certainly had discovered.

67 L. R. Lippard ed., op. cit., p. 141; *Exh. Cat. Marcel Duchamp*, ed. D'Harnancourt, McShine, New York, 1973, p. 233.

68 *Marcel Duchamp du signe suivi de Notes*. Écrits réunis et présentés par Michel Sanouillet et Paul Matisse. Nouvelle édition revue et corrigée avec la collaboration de Anne Sanouillet et Paul B. Franklin. Paris 1975/2008 p. 182.

69 L. S. Gold in: Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp, Interviews...*, p. 69.

70 *Ephemerides*, 19 April 1914, 17 April 1949.

71 H. Belting, *Der Blick hinter Duchamps Tür. Kunst und Perspektive bei Duchamp*, Sugimoto, Jeff Wall, Köln, 2009, p. 19; M. Affron, *The Essential Duchamp*, New Haven, London, 2018, p. 151; Th. de Duve, *Picturaler Nominalismus...*



Fig. 9. The shadow of the hat rack on the right side of the painting *Tu m'*

Other motifs in the painting can now also be interpreted. There is the shadow of a big *Bicycle wheel* (*roue de bicyclette*), another of Duchamp's ready-mades.⁷² It does not move at the moment, as if time stands still in the painting. And what to think about the row of coloured squares, painted by his friend Yvonne Chastel⁷³ that according to numerous scholars are an indication of Duchamp's interest in the 4th dimension after he had been reading works by the French mathematician and philosopher Henri Poincaré.⁷⁴ But it seems as if Duchamp has treated the 4th dimension only as a row of differently coloured squares in which the perspective throughout the painting is always changing.⁷⁵ So it is difficult to see that he was referring to time, which he in fact stopped by including in the painting the wheel's shadow. Moreover, he added a painted crack or tear in the image and he

72 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 278; *Ephemerides*, 15 January 1916 and 4 June 1964, when he told A. Schwarz that this was his first ready-made.

73 *Ephemerides*, 12 April 1918, 8 July 1918; J. Clair, "Duchamp and the Classical Perspectivists", *Artforum*, March 1978, pp. 40–49, about Jean François Niceron (1638/1646) pp. 47–48.

74 L. Dalrymple Henderson, *Duchamp in Context. Science and Technology in the Large Glass and Related Works*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1998, p. 86; eadem, *The 4th Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (PhD Thesis, MIT, Boston 1975) 1983; S. Stauffer, *Duchamp, die Schriften...*, no. 119; P. Cabanne, op. cit., pp. 23–24, 60, 72; Th. Zaunschirm, op. cit., pp. 83–105; J. Clair, op. cit., pp. 47–48; R. Lebel, op. cit., p. 52; H. Belting, op. cit., pp. 45, 46–49; *Ephemerides*, 14 April 1919, 20 October 1920; possibly Duchamp knew the book by E. A. Abbott, *Flatland. A Romance of Many Dimension*, London, 2. edition, 1884, chap. 1.

75 Exh. Cat. *100 Fragen – 100 Antworten* (Archiv C. Stauffer. Ed. Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. Susanne M. J. Kaufmann, Munich, New York, 2018, p. 64.

a attached a real bolt nut to the canvas as if this closes off the row of squares. The three real safety pins that virtually close the painted crack in the canvas again, are not helping to suggest the 4th dimension either, they are more or less announcing the oncoming coloured squares. In any case, throughout Duchamp's painting here the act of seeing and the perception of space and movement are fundamentally put to the test. In addition to this, another sensory organ may be used, one that may replace blindness and would make *Tu m'* even more meaningful.

Hearing

When seeing has been robbed of its exclusivity the other senses may be able to take its place. When you only hear something there is a different kind of experience than what the eyes register. There are no colours, and the mind makes its own images. It may be of some significance that Duchamp supposedly asked a thus far unknown sign painter to add a pointing hand – a common sign in France – on the *Tu m'* painting and write next to the sleeve the words "A. Klang".⁷⁶ Probably this is the signature of an anonymous "board painter" as Duchamp used to say (presumably it was also painted by Yvonne Chastel), as a kind of "trick" aimed at emphasizing the meaning of hearing. Which meaning could that have? After Duchamp in 1913 had composed a piece of music with an at random technique – he called it *erratum musicale*⁷⁷ – that consisted in pulling notes from a row of hats, he could later explain the significance of hearing in his painting. In 1912 he had been staying in Munich for a few months and had studied and translated some pages of Wassily Kandinsky's text *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (The Spiritual in Art), in which painting and sound are declared synesthetic.⁷⁸ Now the half German word "A. Klang" strikes the eye in another way. It indicates the extending *Goupillon*, earlier seen as taste remover. A corkscrew, which has its shadow on the left side of the painting, makes a sound as well, when the cork is removed, but which cannot be the case with a shadow.⁷⁹ Pointing with the finger to "A. Klang" could also mean its negation: a non-sound that is not possible in a painting, and can only be heard in one's imagination – as it is the case in Kandinsky's text.⁸⁰ This interpretation would fit to the other motifs: the stopped

76 Idem, p. 63, in fact not "A. Klein", but "A. Klang".

77 *Erratum musicale* for three voices, the notes for a set of 25 cards, one card for each voice with a single note. They had to be mixed in a row of hats. A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 256.

78 *Ephemerides*, 7 August 1912, 2 October 1903, 21 July 1903. Duchamp learned German at school. P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 57; Marcel Duchamp, *Briefe an/Lettres à/Letters to Marcel Jean*, trans. H. Molderings, Munich, 1987, p. 12; H. Molderings, "Relativismus und historischer Sinn". Exh. Cat. *Marcel Duchamp*, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1999, p. 21, F. 13.

79 *Ephemerides*, 8 July 1918, 20 October 1920.

80 Duchamp said he would not only oppose paintings as such, but also music. O. Hahn, op. cit.; Duchamp made a note about Kandinsky in his *l' Infinitif La mariée, étude 2*. See H. Molderings, "Die Entdeckung des geistigen Sehens. Marcel Duchamp in München 1912", in: *Marcel Duchamp in München 1912*, ed. H. Friedel a.o. Lenbachhaus, Munich, 2012, pp. 23–24; R. Herz,

time, the non-movement, the no-longer-seeing of Medusa's blinding power. And one can remember at this point that Duchamp, when he painted *Tu m'*, was acting in those days for Perret's film as a blind soldier. So in this context, it would make sense to argue that Duchamp, being so much against the beauty of painting, meant Baudelaire's *Hymne à la beauté* (one of his poems from his book *Fleurs du mal* of 1857/1868), where you can read: "Tu marches sur des morts, beauté, dont tu te moques". (You march over the dead, beauty, laughing about them).⁸¹ According to the naming of the dead, it makes even sense to listen to the sounds of the words "tu m'" and "tomb", as Duchamp seemed to have thought about in the last year of his life in 1968.⁸² And furthermore: In the same poem, Baudelaire even called beauty a "monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu!" (huge, fearful, ingenious monster). Could both artists have thought of beauty as a monster, as Medusa, making the viewer dead or blind? The question remains open.

Duchamp stayed attached to the category of hearing: During this time he asked another friend and patron Walter C. Arensberg to hide a sounding object in a ball of twine, then pressed between two metal plates on which a text with large gaps is written. What kind of object it was, in 1916 he called it *With hidden noise* (Fig. 10),⁸³ Duchamp never asked, nor did he ever wanted to know.⁸⁴ This should always remain a faintly audible secret.

His attraction for the sense of hearing has a special history. Already in 1911 at a performance of Raymond Roussel's theatre piece *Impression d'Afrique*,⁸⁵ where

Marcel Duchamp, le Mystère de Munich, Munich, 2012, pp. 182–183. Moldering and Herz did not write about the signature "A. Klang" in relation to Kandinsky. Possibly Duchamp wanted to give a hint to the fact that his patron, Katherine S. Dreier, enthusiastically collected paintings of Kandinsky. Exh. Cat., *In Memory of Katherine S. Dreier 1877–1952. Her Collection of Modern Art*, Yale University Art Gallery, 1953, nos. 33–35; P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 57; C. Thomkins, *Marcel Duchamp. The Afternoon Interviews*, New York, 1964, repr. edition ed. P. Chan, New York, Cologne 2013, p. 36. But Duchamp was opposed to pure paintings, consequently in his painting *Tu m'*. It was his criticism from within the painting.

81 C. Baudelaire, *Les fleurs du mal* (1861), Paris, 1996, p. 52; Baudelaire also wrote a poem about the Medusa related to the Caravaggio's painting in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence. Cf. M. Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, Oxford, 1970, p. 29; Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* was one of the books Duchamps presented by their spine in red leather bindings on the staircase for the *Exposition internationale du Surréalisme* in Galerie Maeght, Paris 1947. E.-Ch. Kraus, *L'Exposition internationale du Surréalisme, 1947. Display-Strategien und kuratorisches Präsentation*. (Diss. Uni. für angewandte Kunst, Vienna), Munich, Vienna, 2010, p. 74.

82 D. Shambroom, *Duchamp's Last Day*, New York, 2018, pp. 21, 32.

83 S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Die Schriften...*, pp. 100, 205; A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 340; P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 54; Duchamp's friend, Walter C. Arensberg, worked as a cryptograph, looking for secret meanings in the work of Shakespeare. Th. Zaunschirm, op. cit., pp. 56–57; F. M. Naumann, *Marcel Duchamp. The Art of Making Art in The Edge of mechanical Reproductions*, New York, 1999, p. 68.

84 J. J. Sweeney, *A Conversation with Marcel Duchamp*. Film of Robert D. Graff, 1955. German trans. S. Stauffer: *Marcel Duchamp. Interviews...*, p. 58.

85 P. Cabanne, op. cit., pp. 33–34. The theatre piece of Roussel, which Duchamp saw in the Théâtre Antoine, was presented one year later than the publication which appeared in Paris in



Fig. 10. Marcel Duchamp, *With hidden noise* (1916)

he experienced that figures, objects and language did not fit together and that the figures seemed to have an underlying communication which was not at all obvious, and a year later, while being a librarian, he discovered Jean-Pierre Brisset's research into languages,⁸⁶ Duchamp learned that written down language can sometimes mean something else than when it is heard. "I like words in a poetic sense. Puns for me are like rhymes [...] Just the sound of these words alone begins a chain reaction", he argued in 1962.⁸⁷ Language thus seemed to contain secret messages that convey a different sense. Ambiguity between one or the other meaning in language will lead to a relinquishing of an experience of a particular sense of truth. In the case of homophones, which one is the right one, the written or the heard? There is loss of identity, or so it seems. You might lose firm ground under your feet and your existence becomes uncertain, when the meaning of both: the written and the spoken language drifts apart completely. What would be right or wrong? Both meanings offer a choice of understanding and in fact do not give any. You can only use your

1911; *Ephemerides*, 5 February 1923, 20 February 1947; J. Vogelaar, "Raymond Roussel – woordspelingen tegen de spelling van het toeval", *Raster* 6, 1978, pp. 54–59.

86 J. P. Brisset, *La science de Dieu ou la création de l'homme*, Paris, 1900; Duchamp admired Brisset, J. J. Sweeney, "Eleven Europeans in America". *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, New York, XIII, 4–5, 1946. German trans. S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp, Interviews...*, p. 38; J.-P. Brisset, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. M. Décimo, Dijon, 2001, Brisset's *Grammaire* was one of the book's spines presented by Duchamp on the staircase on *L'Exposition internationale du Surréalisme*, 1947. E.-Ch. Kraus, op. cit., p. 73.

87 K. Kuh, op. cit., p. 89.

imagination.⁸⁸ Duchamp even declared language to be the “error of mankind”.⁸⁹ He found a solution for homophones in that he mostly looked for a common sense or meaning, although he said to be “indifferent” to every meaning of his work. Duchamp applied anagrams, palindromes or homophones countless times in his art works. There is no need for a first definition, he declared.⁹⁰ Many things have so far been deciphered, but most have not and Duchamp has never offered any help in decoding his work.⁹¹

Smell and taste

The other senses will be mentioned briefly. Duchamp in 1919 brought with him as a souvenir from his hometown for his friend Arensberg a small phial containing the real 50cc of the Parisian air. Paris Air (Air de Paris-tout fait) was meant as a sort of physiological serum.⁹² And in 1921 he produced a perfume bottle labeled *La Belle Halaine – eau de voilette*.⁹³ It bears his initials R. S. (written in mirror image) and a picture of his transvestite alter ego Rose Sélavy (arroser/eros c’est la vie – to spray/watering/Eros is life).

In a text that accompanied a photo collage, Duchamp in 1945 indicated the ability to smell and taste at the same time: “Quand la fumée de tabac sent aussi de la bouche qui exhale, les deux odeurs s’épousent par infra-mince”. (When the tobacco smoke that also smells of the mouth, escapes from it, both these smells unite [or marry] by the ultra-thin (*infra-mince*)”.⁹⁴ On a photograph for the cover of the magazine *VieW* he in 1937 brought together a bottle of wine, where some smell seems to escape and a little tobacco-smoke (Fig. 11).⁹⁵ So smell and taste seem to be mingled. On the back cover you could read the text which explains the image on the front cover.

88 M. Foucault, *Raymond Roussel* (Paris 1963), Frankfurt, 1989, p. 113.

89 S. Stauffer, op. cit., p. 55.

90 H. H. Mann, op. cit., p. 111.

91 F. Cohen, “Le ready-made: à quel titre?”, *Cahiers philosophiques*, 2012, 4, no.131, pp. 37–48. The author offered other possibilities of double meanings in Duchamp’s titles than those, which are named here.

92 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 375; P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 63; *Ephemerides*, 27 December 1919.

93 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 388.

94 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 508; *infra-mince* no. 33 in: S. Stauffer ed., *Marcel Duchamp, die Schriften...*, p. 210; *Ephemerides*, 26 January 1942, 15 March 1945, 15 Augustus 1945; D. de Rougemont, “Marcel Duchamp, mine de rien”, *Preuves*, XVIII, no. 204, pp. 43–47, 46. (German edition S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp Interviews und Statements*, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1992, p. 33).

95 *Ephemerides*, 22 December 1944, 1 January 1945; A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 508. Instead of the label of the wine bottle Duchamp put his Livret Militaire (military service record) on it. P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 85; J. A. Ramirez, *Duchamp. Love and Death, even*, trans. A. R. Tulloch, London, 1998, pp. 193f.; A. von Graevenitz, “Duchamp as a Scientist, Artifex and Semiotic Philosopher, His Notes of the ‘Infra-Mince’”, in: S. Banz ed., *Duchamp and the Forestay Waterfall. Symposium, Concert, Interventions, Exhibitions*, Zürich, 2010, pp. 216–231; U. Berlot, “Duchamp and the Notion of Optical Tactility”, PhD Thesis, University of Lubljana, 2011, in: *Art: Emotion and Value. 5th Mediterranean Congress of Aesthetics*, 2011; J.-M. Rabayé, “Hauchdünnes Betastungsmaterial

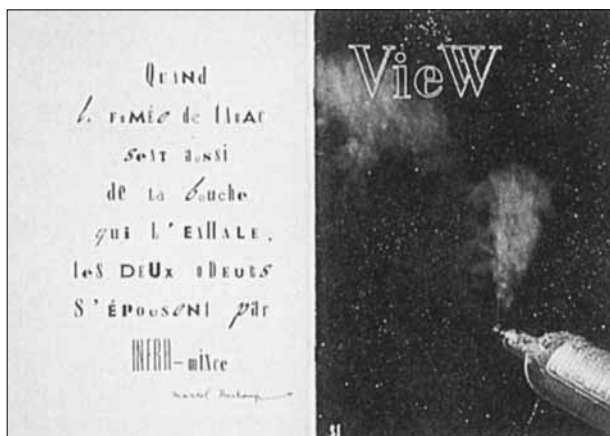


Fig. 11. The cover of the magazine *VieW* with the text about *infra-mince*

Feeling and Touch

In Duchamp's oeuvre indeed not one of our senses can replace blindness as good as touch. In 1943 his design for the back cover of the almanach *V.V.V.* consisting of an outline of a headless female torso in which he inserted chicken wire.⁹⁶ The reader who wanted to touch the female body had to put his fingers into the wire and would then touch a photo of someone with arms and hands raised as if in a prayer. At another time he became clearer: in 1947 he politely asked the public *prière de toucher* (please touch) (Fig. 12).⁹⁷ And when they opened the catalogue of *L'Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, 1947* (otherwise known as *Le Surréalisme en 1947*), they would see a single breast made from foam. (In this case Enrico Donati helped him to form the breast by foam). "What is the role of eroticism in your work?", Pierre Cabanne asked him. His answer was: "Énorme. Visible ou voyante, ou en tout cas sous-jacente". (Enormous. Visible or demonstrative, or in any case underlying).⁹⁸

The importance of touch led to Duchamp's considering whether this could not be the actual 4th Dimension.⁹⁹ He left it there, a mere consideration, but just

oder die Spur einer Spur. Über Duchamps faits divers", in: *Just not in Time. Inframedialität und Non-Lineare Zeitlichkeiten in Kunst, Film, Literatur und Philosophie*, eds. I. Becker, Ilka, M. Cuntz and M. Wetzl, Munich, 2011, pp. 99–119.

96 Duchamp worked in this case together with Frederick Kiesler for *The Magazin V.V.V.*, ed. André Breton, 1943; *Ephemerides*, 13 March 1943; A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 491.

97 *Ibid.*, no. 523; *Ephemerides*, 7 July 1947; G. Parkinson, *The Duchamp Book*, London, 2008, p.77. In 1968 Duchamp made an etching *Morceaux choisis d'après Ingres II*, where a man touches the breast of a woman. A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 651; E. Filipovic, *The Apparently Marginal Activities of Marcel Duchamp*, Cambridge Mass., London, 2016, p. 190.

98 P. Cabanne, op. cit., 1960, p. 21; *Ephemerides*, 13 November 1959 in: BBC Radio Programm, series *Art-Anti Art*, London, 14 November 1959; M. Décimo ed., *Marcel Duchamp et l'érotisme*, Dijon, 2008.

99 "L'acte érotique" (1961) in: *Marcel Duchamp, à l'infinif...*, p. 1.

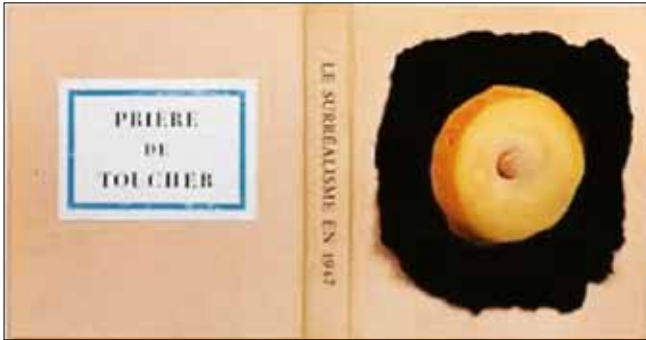


Fig. 12. Marcel Duchamp, *Prière de toucher*. Cover of the catalogue of the 1947, *Exposition internationale du surréalisme*

remarked: “We have three dimensions with the sense of touch. So, I thought that the only sense we have that could help us get a physical notion of a four-dimensional object would be touch again. Because to understand something in four dimensions, conceptually speaking, would amount to seeing around an object without having to move: to feel around it. For example, I noticed that when I hold a knife, a small knife, I get the feeling from all side at once. And this is as close as it can be to the fourth-dimensional feeling. Of course, from there I went to the physical act of love, which is also a feeling all around, either as a woman or as a man. Both have fourth-dimensional feelings. This is why love has been so respected! Anyway, that’s an amusing idea that doesn’t have to be proved or catalogued”.¹⁰⁰ In this light, one may remember the real bolt and the three real safety pins which Duchamp integrated in his painting *Tu m’*, where they indeed were placed at the end of the “upcoming” squares, interpreted as a visual quote of the 4th dimension. They now can be interpreted as his answer to the theory of the 4th dimension as being Time. His answer was: no, it may be Touch instead.

Blindness for Duchamp is apparently meant only as an outward indication, which is a symptom for a physical core,¹⁰¹ in this case it is his opposition against what he called “retinal art”; it is not meant as a challenge, to become really blind. A different kind of blindness is suggested here, one that is part of a complex of aesthetics. “Art is not what one sees. It is in the gaps in between. I like that idea, even when it may be wrong I accept it as truth,” he stated.¹⁰² He looked out for a “Thought-image”.¹⁰³

In reality of course, Duchamp had to admit that the eyes were the most important sense organs for experiencing his art, even when they are not completely reli-

100 C. Thomkins, *Marcel Duchamp, the Afternoon...*, pp. 92–93.

101 G. Didi-Hubermann, op. cit., p. 301.

102 S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp. Schriften...*, p. 215, English edition p. 234.

103 H. Molderings, *Marcel Duchamp. Parawissenschaft, das Ephemere und der Skeptizismus*, Düsseldorf, 3. revised ed., 1997; idem, *Duchamp and the Aesthetics...*, chap. 6 “The Crisis of the Scientific Concept of Truth”, pp. 99ff; idem, “Marcel Duchamps Schnitte durch den 4-dimensionalen Raum. (Fragments of a paper)”, in: *Marcel Duchamp. Respirateur*, ed. K. von Berswordt-Wallrabe, Ostfildern-Ruit, 1995, pp. 119–169.

able, but at least being “visible ou voyante”. And indeed the eyes were for him only a starting point for, as he always explained, “using my grey matter”.¹⁰⁴ The visible was only an indication of thinking. Well known is the expression “blind-date”; it once used to be a “rendez-vous” with an unknown person.¹⁰⁵ It certainly would have struck Duchamp’s eye, enthusiastic eroticist as he was. In fact he called in 1916 four of his postcards to people with some cryptic texts on it his “rendez-vous”¹⁰⁶ The visible in the case of Duchamp indicates at other possible mental associations, be they an apparition as a distortion of the senses, or an everyday object in its alienating context. The associations may occur with the assistance of the other senses, and even these are not sharply defined and open to other possibilities. He himself was “indifferent” in this sense, as he has always explained,¹⁰⁷ and the viewer makes the actual artwork, it is his or her “creative act”, he declared in 1957.¹⁰⁸ The artist’s role in this would only be as “a blind medium”, he stated already earlier in 1949.¹⁰⁹ He also argued about the un-definability that was the result of the objects’ alienation. They always had something “magic” in them that would result in an enigmatic quality.¹¹⁰ Magic plays its part. What we cannot experience with our senses, he often reflected, is tautological, something like metaphysics or religion.¹¹¹ But even more difficult, because paradoxical, is the perception through our senses. The viewer is in an impossible situation, comparable with Duchamp’s 1959/1960 etching *NON*.¹¹² It is an anagram, a tautology, at least that is our first impression. But the word is also an impossibility, because although it may resist its readability through its own negation and refuse everything,¹¹³ it is still being read with our eyes. Blindness as a symptom indicates a paradox.¹¹⁴

Translated from German by Martin Adrichem

104 P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 19; *Ephemerides*, 16 November 1954.

105 *Ephemerides*, 20 January 1957; U. Paulhans-Bühler, *Gegeben sei: Duchamps Flaschentrockner in der vierten Dimension*, Hamburg, 2009, p. 65.

106 *Ephemerides*, 6 February 1916.

107 P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 42.

108 M. Duchamp, “The Creative Act”, *Art News*, vol. 56, 4, 1957.; W. Doerstel, *Augenpunkt, Lichtquelle, Scheidewand. Die symbolische Form im Werk Marcel Duchamps*, Cologne, 1989, p. 27.

109 *Ephemerides*, 20 December 1949.

110 H. Th. Flemming, “Immer spielt Magie hinein’. Interview mit Marcel Duchamp”, *Die Welt*, 18 October 1965, p. 7; K. Seligmann, “Magic and the arts”, *View*, October 1945; *Ephemerides*, 1 November 1946. Duchamps integrated the spines of the books of Meister Eckhart and Valentin Andreae into his staircase of *L’Exposition internationale du Surréalisme*, Galerie Maeght, Paris, 1947, photo in: E.-Ch. Kraus, op. cit., p. 75.

111 P. Cabanne, op. cit., p. 163; B. Jansen, “*Chacun son Marcel?*” *Meerduidigheid in het werk van Marcel Duchamp*, (PhD Thesis, Leiden), Amsterdam, 2015, p. 397.

112 S. Stauffer, *Marcel Duchamp, die Schriften...*, p. 212; U. Paulhans-Bühler, op. cit., p. 9.

113 A. Schwarz, op. cit., no. 570; *Ephemerides*, 4 Augustus 1959. Duchamp made the etching in 1959 to illustrate the poem *Première Lumière* by Pierre André Benoit about “In the Beginning was the Word and it was Nothing”, in: *Ephemerides*, 16 January 1952.

114 He liked paradoxa: “I am in favour of contradictions and particularly without oneself”. *Ephemerides*, 6 January 1961; *Ephemerides*, 4 October 1954. Duchamp told Rean Reboul his opinion about a paradox: “For me there is something other than yes, no, and indifferent – it

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is for example the absence of investigations of this kind. [...] The opposition of quite clear meanings". Did Duchamp Perhaps Duchamp knew a sentence of Lautréamont: "Il y avait du vague dans mon esprit, un je ne sais quoi épais, comme la fumée [...] Il méritait l'épreuve des plus grands supplices; car, il y a du mépris aveugle dans son insouciance ignorante". I. Ducasse, *Les chants de Maldoror* (1869/1874) II.10, ed. G. Toffin, Switch, online publication, 2015, p. 99, <https://www.amazon.com/Chants-Maldoror-Lautr%C3%A9amont-Illustr%C3%A9-Aventure-ebook/dp/B014OE31LW> [accessed 22 May 2020], ("There was a vagueness in my mind, something thick as smoke [...] He would deserve the ordeal of great tortures; for there is blind disdain in his ignorant indifference"). Quoted in English in: A. Hill, *Duchamp passim. A Marcel Duchamp Anthology*. Gordon an Breach Arts International. Asia, Australia, Europe, USA, 1994, p. 182; *Ephemerides*, 8 December 1946. Duchamp loved the book of Lautréamont, which he read in 1912. It was one of the 5–6 books he wanted to keep in his library. Quoted in: L. Lippard, op. cit., p. 142. Duchamp presented the spine of Lautréamont's book on the staircase for the 1947 *L'Exposition internationale du Surréalisme*, see E.-Ch. Kraus, op. cit., p. 74.

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